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SUBJECT: EU-MAURITANIA TALKS SCHEDULED ON POLITICAL WAY FORWARD

¶1. The European Union has scheduled talks with the Mauritanian junta for October 20 in Paris to discuss a mutually acceptable way forward politically in the African state. Commission contacts say they are not optimistic the Mauritanian delegation, led by PM Laghdaf, will come prepared to give imprisoned President Abdullahi a role in negotiating and participating in a new government, which is the European Commission's bottom line. Junta leaders have proposed no solutions during pre-negotiation talks with the EU, according to a Commission contact.

¶2. The October 20 consultations are part of an established process under Article 96 of the Cotonou Agreement governing development assistance and cooperation between the European Commission and receiving countries in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific. The August 6 coup overthrowing a democratically-elected president led the European Council to approve in September the sending of a letter from the EU to the Mauritanian government requesting the talks. The EU delegation to the Paris consultations will be led by Commissioner Louis Michel and French Secretary of State for Cooperation Alain Joyandet.

¶3. When the talks are completed, the Commission will report to the European Council, which will then decide on a course of action for the EU. If the talks are successful, development assistance will likely be reinstated, but if they fail, the Council may consider targeted sanctions, including travel restrictions and asset freezes against key government officials and/or companies, according to Commission officials.

¶4. European Union officials have consistently said since the coup that the EU seeks a "rapid return to constitutionality" in Mauritania. That may be defined, however, as something less than a complete return to power by President Abdullahi. An official at the German Permanent Representation to the European Union said Germany's position is that it is unrealistic to expect the junta to relinquish power fully and that some power-sharing or transitional agreement should be negotiated. The European Council's Africa Working Group has discussed Mauritania several times since the coup, but it has made no decisions pending the outcome of the Article 96 talks.

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